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II.—*On Picturesque Description in Books of Travels.* By Colonel Jackson (St. Petersburg).

THE subject of this notice may possibly appear at first sight foreign to, or at least very indirectly connected with, geographical science; nevertheless I hope to succeed in showing that propriety in the picturesque description of travels is by no means an object unworthy of attention.

It will be generally admitted that a predilection for geographical knowledge is first acquired by the perusal of those extraordinary and surprising adventures of travellers which amuse our boyhood; and is subsequently strengthened by the rational interest which we take in scenes, and men, and manners, differing essentially from all which meets our own eye. From this interest in other scenes and other manners, the inquiring mind rises to the consideration of the causes, physical and moral, of the great diversity spread over the globe, and arrives ultimately at the grand object of speculation,—the advantages to be derived to mankind in general, and to our country in particular, from our acquired knowledge.

Our incipient acquaintance with the globe we inhabit being, therefore, to be traced to the allurements of picturesque description, its importance is evident. Indeed geography, as a science, has the disadvantage common to all other sciences, of being, when abstractly treated, dry and uninteresting to all but those who love it for itself; and it would, therefore, like all other sciences, be cultivated but by a very few, were it not associated with attractive accessories; of which the principal is picturesque description. This not only arouses our attention but keeps it awake. It is the flowery margin by the way-side, which invites us to the path and lures us insensibly on till we arrive at the goal, which a dreary and desolate road would have diverted us from attempting to reach.

Not only then is picturesque description a necessary element in the perfect composition of a book of travels, but works professedly on geographical science must borrow its assistance; for though limited indeed the number of persons who peruse a treatise of geography, compared with the multitudes who greedily devour the relations of travellers, that number would still be infinitely less, if the compilers of these treatises did not admit into their descriptions of localities and habits, the lively pictures drawn by the authors whose separate labours it is their province to combine and group into a perfect whole.

This necessity of picturesque description is too well understood for us to have any reason to complain of its being unemployed; but we have much reason for discontent, both as to the choice of subjects and the manner of treating them.

With regard to the subjects, they consist of all such as are

susceptible of being, as it were, presented to the eye through the medium of words, and therefore, like pictures themselves, are sufficiently various to suit all kinds of tastes, and may like them be faulty or perfect in their execution. But though the particular tastes of men cause them to prefer particular subjects in painting, there is nevertheless a general taste, if I may so say, for certain subjects which affect almost all men alike, and of which almost all men are capable of judging. So is it with picturesque descriptions : they may, according to their respective objects, suit different tastes, but of these objects there is one particular class which interests all men, and of which all may judge. Of this class are all those scenes wherein the conduct and feelings of men are naturally represented. To interest the general reader, therefore, it is necessary that the writer of travels pay particular attention to the picturesque in his descriptions of manners and customs and feelings.

Feelings and actions, it may be thought, are not fit subjects of the picturesque, but they are strictly so, and are as susceptible of representation by picturesque description as by the painter's art. Any moral subject which a painter can treat so as to convey to our minds the particular conduct and feelings of men in particular circumstances, are susceptible of being represented by a verbal picture.

A cold detail of the usages of different nations, though the information may be exact and its result attended with utility, is far from having the same influence as when the personages are made to speak and act, as it were, in our immediate presence. In the first case there is something vague and undefined which leaves us strangers to the secret motives of men, and we remain indifferent to actions of which we see neither the cause nor the effect, without a degree of abstraction of which few are capable, and of which fewer still are willing to undergo the effort. Whereas, when we ourselves are made to assist and become actors in the various scenes of foreign manners, when we converse with the natives of different climes, sit in their family circles, sleep under their roofs, wander with their hunting parties, take part in their battles, assist at their domestic and public ceremonies, dance with them when gay, and mingle our tears with theirs in the hour of their sorrow ; then and then alone can we truly admire, grieve, sympathise with, or execrate the customs and the feelings we witness. Then and then only can we trace the various effects of various climates, laws, institutions and religions, distinguish what is national from what is adventitious or imposed, and learn what methods are most likely to succeed, either to civilize or improve what is defective in the people we examine, or to ensure those relations of amity which it may be our interest to cultivate.

It is not sufficient to be told that a people are groaning under the accumulated horrors of slavery, nor even to be informed of the general details of these horrors. In their vague enumeration freemen cannot understand them nor consequently sympathise. But a single picturesque description, a single scene of the human sufferings incident to a state of absolute slavery, brought, as it were, palpably before our eyes, where we are made to see the anguish and hear the cries of the wretched victims of a remorseless oppression; then our feelings are roused, our indignation is kindled, and we are prompted to take part in any thing which may be proposed for the emancipation of suffering innocence.

What is here asserted of the case of slavery is equally true of every other, and, when we would paint the manners of mankind and the dispositions of various people, it is not sufficient to say generally that they are cruel or humane, or brave or cowardly, gay or serious, hospitable or unkindly, frank or reserved, modest or licentious, generous or interested, indolent or industrious, tolerant or fanatic, intelligent or stupid, learned or ignorant, effeminate or bold and manly, &c.; but instances must be given, and not merely in the way of recital, but by making us assist as actors, or at least as spectators, in such scenes as are best calculated to give us an intimate acquaintance with the people of whom we read.

This requires much art and talent of a superior order, for while in such cases the narrator himself must be frequently an actor, he must avoid the fault, into which so many writers of travels have fallen, of making himself the principal personage of his tale.

If from moral we descend to material objects, I would in like manner say, paint rather than describe. When we are told in general terms that houses are well built, that their interiors are comfortable, that the people display much taste in their adjustment; it is evident that every reader will judge of this comfort, this taste, &c., according to his own standard in such matters; a standard probably different for every reader, and quite dissimilar to that of the writer.

It is true that for many objects of the material kind real pictures or plates convey more and better at a single glance than the most accurate description, and the want of these is frequently a defect in many books of travels; but they are attended with considerable expense, particularly if coloured, which it were to be wished that such objects always were. Moreover, the drawings of a work should be intended only to assist in giving a more correct idea of objects mentioned in the text. Plates are wanting in life and movement. It is the business of the text to animate the scene, to warm the landscape, to make the figures move and speak.

Many travellers have a very mistaken notion of picturesque description, and if some are too vague and undefined, others, on the contrary, are prolix to excess, and, from a desire of bringing the minutest objects before the eye of the reader, present a confused accumulation in which neither the whole nor the particulars are to be distinctly seen. This is particularly the case with regard to the description of views. The traveller, seated on some lofty eminence, discovers a vast horizon. Here the sea—a port—a city rising in form of an amphitheatre, and crowned with a citadel; there a range of hills, rising in succession, displaying at intervals its loftiest peaks; at his feet, a river winding through the valley, fertilizing its meadows, and impelling its mills; on his right a ruined castle; on his left an awful precipice and a roaring torrent, and behind, another valley spreading away in faint perspective. What traveller has not admired scenes like this? Every country almost has many such; therefore to make it *local*, every circumstance of the sea, of its port, of the town, of the citadel, the individual mountains of the chain, the breadth and windings of the river, the dimensions of the valley through which it runs, the various produce of its fields, the mills, the farms, the villages, the churches, the trees, the labourers, the cattle, the colour and the nature of the ruin on his right hand, the abyss on his left, the cataract, its noise, its foam, its cloud of spray, its rainbows, the screeching birds that hover overhead, the valley behind, all, all is described with the minutest exactness. But though the traveller be at leisure to sit the live-long day upon his rocky eminence admiring, amused, and interested, as he directs his attention first to one, then to another object, he should remember that the pages of his description are soon run over, and that from the very details by which he thought to captivate attention, and fix the locality in the reader's mind, a confusion is occasioned which leaves no distinct idea at all.

When we consider that even the best description of scenery, I mean such as is best calculated to form a distinct image in the mind, fails in precision, and that the image, if it were painted by twenty different readers, would probably be different with each, we must remain convinced how futile is the endeavour to do aught else in this respect than convey a general idea,—I mean a general idea of the particular scene. And herein lies the difficulty; for the idea, though general with regard to details, must be precise with regard to peculiarity of the whole. The grand art is in seizing the most striking peculiarity of the landscape, whether derived from natural causes or from human industry. And as a rule, I think it may be laid down, that, generally speaking, that peculiarity will be found in the first impression produced on the first glance. It is this impression, then, that must be recorded and

transmitted, and if some of the details can be conveyed by the assistance of drawings it is well, if not, they must be but slightly touched in the text.

Much of the effect of a landscape depends on the nature of the vegetation peculiar to the country or to the spot, but it is not in painting the landscape generally that the form, the colour, the height, &c., of the trees, should be minutely detailed. This is best done, if necessary, in the botanical details of the voyage, or may be incidentally introduced in some part of the work where the object is not to represent an extensive view.

Individual features of a landscape may be more particularly described when they are the sole objects to be presented, but even here care must be taken to avoid minutiae. A lake is better conceived when we are told, for instance, that it is hemmed in on all sides by lofty and precipitous mountains, whose shades give a gloomy tint to the waters below, than if the length, and breadth, and sinuosities of the lake, the height, and nature, and form of each particular mountain by name—the several kinds of trees by which they may be clothed, were given in detail.* For the reader pictures an imaginary scene, and imagination is by its nature so fugitive, that when we consider one part of the picture it forms the other has already fled, and the whole is no longer seizable; whereas the simple picture is retained in its integrity, and the impression is more permanent.

Another error, not uncommon, is to imagine that picturesque description refers only to those objects which by painters are termed *picturesque*. Dr. Syntax may look out exclusively for such, but with the traveller picturesque description should have a much wider signification; and if he set before our view a dreary desert without a shrub, in all its nudity, its bleak and desolate expanse, his description is picturesque. Such scenes, be it observed, are best painted by the moral feelings they inspire.

It is with the description of a landscape as with music, the chief charm of both is in association. Melody is of itself agreeable to the ear, and a rich and varied landscape pleasing to the eye; but it is only when the harmony of sounds finds an echo in the feelings, and when the scenes we contemplate connect themselves in our minds with the happiness or misery of those who inhabit them, that they have any real interest. Hence, descriptions of scenery in a book of travels, if they be merely thrown in, as is too often the case, to fill up or to amuse the fancy, are of little value; whereas, when their object is to excite our sympathy for the natural disadvantages under which certain nations labour, or to point out

* It must be remembered, we are speaking of picturesque descriptions, and not of those details necessary when our object is physical geography.

the peculiar blessings which a fine country affords, together with the moral influence in both cases over the minds, the dispositions, and characters of men, then they rise in importance, and add fresh interest to the traveller's narration.

Every attentive observer will find a great analogy between the general aspect of a country and the temper and sentiments of its inhabitants, independent of the immediate influence of climate; and whenever this analogy is found not to exist, the cause of the anomaly will generally be discovered in a forced and unnatural organization of the social state. Indeed, there can hardly be a greater proof of a bad administration than when we see a rich and fertile country, abounding in all the lavish beauties of lovely scenery, inhabited by people of a gloomy and unsocial character.

Much curious speculation might be made on this matter, and a great deal might be written on the subject of picturesque description. We have examples in abundance of its abuses and defects, and have also a few models of excellence in this part of travel-writing. To enlarge upon the subject here, however, would be to occupy a space which must be reserved for subjects of greater interest. Before concluding, however, I will say one word on the subject of the expressions made use of in description.

Whenever we are forcibly struck with any scene, moral or material, our sentiments are generally exaggerated, and if we write while the impression is still strong, our language naturally partakes of the exaltation of our feelings. Hence is to be traced many of those highly-coloured descriptions which, as they are seldom correct, are so much the more dangerous as they delight us more. True to the expression of his feelings, the writer had no intention to deceive; his descriptions are nevertheless exaggerated, and when discovered to be so he loses all the influence of authority.

To write so as to make others feel we must feel ourselves, but eloquence to be persuasive need not be florid, and description to be striking need not be exaggerated. Simplicity is often a beauty, and false colouring destroys the effect of the most beautiful objects. There are certain things which neither words nor the ablest efforts of the pencil can ever faithfully represent. Whenever a writer, therefore, attempts to bring such before us by multiplying epithets and metaphors, and by racking his brain for words of imitative harmony, he only shows his want of taste and judgment. This is a very common fault, and should be guarded against.

There is in most kinds of writing of the present day an exaggeration of sentiment, an effort at originality at any price, an unnatural strain of language, subversive alike of pure morals, of refined taste, and of correct judgment. But surely books of travels should not have caught the infection. Travellers should deal in facts, and in their laudable endeavours to interest and amuse while they in-

struct, they should never forget the dignity of their mission, nor condescend to sacrifice truth and elegance to the absurd exigencies of a corrupted taste.

Never perhaps were books of travels so much read as now. This has induced every tourist to give to the world the account of his rambles under all kinds of titles. The corruption of that kind of writing has followed as a natural consequence. If therefore we would wish accounts of travels and voyages, those elements of geographical science, to maintain their proper station in the estimation of enlightened Europe, we cannot too strongly recommend attention to that most attractive part of such accounts—*Picturesque Description*.

III.—*On the Eruption of the Volcano of Cosigüina, in Nicaragua, 17th January, 1835.* By Colonel Don Juan Galindo, corresponding Member R. G. S. L.

ONE of the most stupendous convulsions of the globe, ever known in America, took place last January in the eruption of the volcano of Cosigüina, situated in Nicaragua, one of the states of Central America, and near the eastern promontory of the bay of Conchagua, which separates the waters of the Gulf from the Pacific*. It has never been known to break out before.

The following is an extract from a letter, written by myself, and dated February 7 :—

“ Still in ignorance respecting the precise theatre of the volcanic eruptions of last month, I can as yet only state my former mistaken conjectures respecting it, and others of the same class, to which it gave rise throughout Central America.

“ Near Salamá, the chief city of Verapas, being on the road from Guatemala to the port of Isabal, I distinctly heard, on the night between the 16th and 17th of January, continued noises similar to those produced by volcanic eruptions, yet with something particular in the sounds, which made them rather resemble the discharge of single large guns.

“ On the night of the 22nd I was also bivouacking on the banks of the Polochic, about thirteen leagues from Isabal. Here the apparent firing again began about 11 p.m., the guns, as we supposed them, being heard at regular intervals. Both my men and myself had been accustomed, during our whole lives, to hear volcanic eruptions in all parts of Central America ; yet for some hours we entertained not the least doubt that the noise was produced by artillery, and that it proceeded from the direction of Isabal. I could not therefore but conclude that an action was taking place in that port ; though again re-

* In latitude 13° N. ; long. 87° 35' W.